

July 29, 2009 - Ad Campaign Targets Aircraft Engine Plan

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Ad campaign targets aircraft engine plan

BY MIKE FAHER

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JOHNSTOWN

— A complex military-policy debate over an expensive aircraft engine doesn't fit neatly on a billboard.

But a Washington, D.C.-based group is hoping downtown Johnstown drivers get the message, which is not coincidentally posted near Democratic U.S. Rep. John Murtha's home office.

"What we're asking for people to do is just go to the Web site and educate themselves," said Tom Schatz, president of Citizens Against Government Waste.

As part of a national advertising campaign, Schatz's organization has posted large billboards in Johnstown and Windber.

The message likely is not immediately clear for passing motorists: The sign features 53 planes, accompanied by a message: "Don't let Congress shoot down 53 Joint Strike Fighters for the price of one engine."

The reference is to the citizens group's continuing opposition to development of two engines for the proposed Joint Strike Fighter, an aircraft that is expected to be widely used by the Air Force, Army and Navy.

Citizens Against Government Waste argues that only one engine design is necessary. Developing two different engines, the group says, will cost an additional \$7.2 billion and result in the military's ordering 53 fewer planes.

"The secretary of defense has said this is not something we need," Schatz said of the extra engine.

The group also has set up a Web page devoted to the topic: www.cagw.org/engine.

While Schatz said the ad campaign "is not targeted at any particular member of Congress," it's no accident that the billboards have shown up in the 12th Congressional District represented by Murtha.

The congressman, who chairs the House Defense Appropriations Subcommittee, is a supporter of developing two strike-fighter engines.

Murtha said the contracts make sense economically. And, given the number of fighters that will be built, he said the competing engine projects will provide a valuable backup.

One engine is being developed by Connecticut-based Pratt & Whitney, while the other will be produced jointly by General Electric and Rolls Royce.

"An alternative engine will provide cost savings through competition as well as provide greater reliability down the road in case we have problems with one engine that could potentially ground our entire tactical aircraft fleet," Murtha said in a prepared statement.

The congressman added that there is "strong bipartisan support within Congress for an alternative engine."

Citizens Against Government Waste rejects Murtha's reasoning, saying there is no proof that competition between the two projects will result in any cost savings.

And Schatz does not buy into the argument that two engines are necessary for safety's sake.

"There's not an alternative (contractor) for the wings or the cockpit or the computer systems," he said.

Murtha spokesman Matt Mazonkey said the government-waste group's concerns shouldn't carry much weight in Congress.

"You have to take with a grain of salt the comments made by organizations that are getting paid to lobby on a particular subject," Mazonkey said. "As with every issue, we look at the facts, and the facts show that having two engines is good for both competition and reliability."

White House officials do not favor the development of two engines, and they have threatened a veto of a defense-spending bill that funds both projects.

The issue may come up for debate in the House as early as today.